U.S. Strategy, the JCPOA
Iranian Nuclear Arms Agreement, and the Gulf: Playing the Long Game

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Few recent American foreign policy decisions have been as divisive as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear arms control agreement with Iran. Advocates of the agreement have focused far too exclusively on its potential benefits. Opponents equally exclusively on its potential faults. Both sides tend to forget that any feasible arms control agreement between what are hostile sides tends to be a set of compromises that are an extension of arms races and potential conflicts by other means. As a result, imperfect agreements with uncertain results are the rule, not the exception.

President Trump has made it clear that he opposes the agreement and would like to terminate it. His dismissal of Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State, and his replacement by Mike Pompeo – along with his dismissal of General H.R. McMaster and replacement with John Bolton – indicate that President Trump may well seek to terminate the agreement in the near future – action which might or might not have significant bipartisan support. He faces a May 5th to decide whether to again waive economic sanction against Iran, a decision which comes up for renewal every 120 days.

The Need for a “Long Game” Instead of Provoking Another Regional Crises

There are short terms reasons for not seeking any early termination of the agreement. The U.S. has not been able to persuade our European allies to join us, much less Russia and China. The U.S.’ focus on issues like the time limits in the agreement and minor problems in verification and compliance appears more ideological than practical. It has put the U.S. on defensive – while waiting for some tangible serious Iranian violation might get far broader support.

The key problems for U.S. strategy, however, are not whether to end the agreement regardless of the consequences and the degree of broad international support for such an action. It is rather how to find some way to make the agreement better, or find some way to end it that provides a better option for regional security or at least does not make things worse. Iran’s nuclear, missile, and other threats are far too real for the U.S. to simply terminate its support for the JCPOA without focusing on cost-benefits of such an action.

Moreover, the U.S. must consider its other real-world priorities in dealing with the Iranian threat. It must deal with more than the nuclear dimension, and do everything possible to create an effective mix of containment, deterrent, and warfighting forces to deal with three other aspects of Iran’s military capabilities:

- Iran’s growing conventional armed ballistic, cruise, and long-range anti-ship missile capabilities.
- Iran’s growing mix of asymmetric naval-missile-air forces tailored to threaten shipping, petroleum, and naval traffic through the Gulf and nearby waters in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea.
- Iran’s growing regional influence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and threat to Bahrain.

Provoking an avoidable near-term crisis over a nuclear threat that has largely been defused for at least the near-term will do nothing to unify support in dealing with these threats from counties like Britain, France, and Italy – or persuade them to build up their power projection capabilities.

It will do nothing to unite America’s deeply divided Arab security partners – which now have virtually destroyed the Gulf Cooperation Council. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain have
openly split with Qatar, Oman increasingly stands aside, and a deeply divided Kuwait seeks to mediate. Jordan is under growing economic and refuge pressure and was never integrated into Gulf defense, and Iraq seems to be tilting towards Iran and not the Arab states and the U.S.

Talking about regime change in Iran ignores the fact that the Iranian government quickly suppressed the most recent demonstrations which were far more limited than those during the "green" uprisings in 2009-2010, and the fact that Iran has steadily improved its internal security capabilities. Overt U.S.-led threats to Iran seem far more likely to increase popular support for the regime and its hardline elements than catalyze any meaningful resistance.

Seeking regime change also ignores the fact that Iran's outside opposition groups clearly have marginal support, that there is no demand for the Shah's son, and the leading opposition movement was supported by Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War, and has a cult-like character that makes the Iraq exiles the U.S. tried to rely on in 2003 seem almost pragmatic and balanced by comparison.

Longer term regime modification, however, may be possible. There clearly are elements in the current government that do want to focus on Iran's internal development and stability. Mixing a major U.S. effort to build-up an effective mix of U.S. and security partner deterrent and containment capabilities – coupled to conditional economic incentives that clearly tie improved trade and financial ties to an Iranian focus on civil development – may accomplish far more in practical terms.

Iran faces massive population pressure and economic challenges. Showing Iranians that they have a real alternative to confrontation and a massive arms race – rather than simply face open-ended U.S and Arab hostility – is far more likely to change the behavior and nature of the government in ways that bring moderation and stability than U.S.-led military action.

**Key Areas of Criticism**

The case for seeking immediate modification of the JCPOA is also weak compared to the need for a longer-term consensus on putting internal pressure on Iran. The JCPOA – like all real-world arms control agreements – has a number of faults, limits, and/or weaknesses. Critics of the JCPOA have focused on its limits and potential weaknesses. Experts disagree about the seriousness and nature of these agreements, but most critics focus on the following:

- The time limits to various aspects of inspection or formal limits on given aspects of Iran conduct. (The agreement has no time limits on Iran’s ability to acquire nuclear weapons.)
- Limits on frequency, depth, and coverage of key inspection activities.
- The level of depth and transparency in UN reporting.
- The fact that Iran had reach something close to breakout capability before the agreement and many of its nuclear activities can continue as part of its nuclear power program, including the development of far more advanced centrifuges and reactor design.
- Iran's potential ability to conceal ongoing nuclear weapons development and research activities – some of which can be extremely difficult to detect and verify.
- The fact it did not limit Iran's missile and delivery system development activity, and only put relatively short limits on its capabilities to import new weapons and delivery system components.
- The fact it did not affect any of Iran's activities to increase its strategic influence in the region – particularly in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.
One can argue the relative importance of each of these limits, and whether any form more comprehensive arms control agreement was possible in 2015, or is possible now. there is no doubt, however, that the JCPOA could be made better and more binding if this could be negotiated.

**Keeping the JCPOA’s Gains**

At the same time, the U.S. needs to be careful. The JCPOA has also had a major impact on Iran’s programs, and does contain a binding agreement, with no time limits, that Iran will not develop and deploy nuclear weapons. As of yet, there has been no evidence of serious and lasting Iranian violations – and some problems in interpretation and implementation timing are the rules in every serious arms control effort.

Opponents of the agreement also tend to ignore its tangible benefits, and what Iran had to do to meet the initial requirements of the JCPOA agreement on its Implementation Day (January 1, 2016). It met the following requirements:

- Implementing ban on enrichment beyond 3.67 per cent and plutonium reprocessing
- Eliminating Iran's stockpile of medium-enriched uranium, and placing limits on Iran's holdings of low enriched uranium (for 15 years).
- Reducing stockpiles of enriched uranium to agreed levels (cut of 98% from 10,000 kg to 300 kg) for 15 years, including the shipment of 11 ton (25,000 pounds) of low-enriched uranium materials from Iran to Russia.
- Removing numerous centrifuges (roughly 2/3s) and related infrastructure from its uranium enrichment plants at Natanz and Fordow, and place them in storage for 10 years. Cut from 19,000 centrifuges (of which 10,000 were operational) to no more than 6,104 operational centrifuges, with only 5,060 IR-1 centrifuges allowed to enrich uranium.
- Limit enrichment capacity to the Natanz plant, and centrifuges to IR-1 type centrifuges, the oldest and least efficient. Give up advanced IR-2M centrifuges for 10 years. The non-operating centrifuges will be stored in Natanz and monitored by IAEA, but may be used to replace failed centrifuges.
- Iran will not build any additional heavy-water reactors for 15 years.
- Limit nuclear R&D activity to the Natanz facility and accept certain limitations for the first eight years in order to limit Iran a breakout time of one year.
- Removal of the core from the Arak heavy water reactor and fill the openings into the reactor core tank or calandria with concrete in ways that made it permanently inoperable.
- Modernize and rebuild the heavy-water research reactor in Arak to become an agreed design for peaceful nuclear research and production needs and purposes. Minimize the production of plutonium and not produce weapons grade plutonium. Limit power to 20 MWth (Megawatt thermal) and send all spent fuel out of country.
- Agree to not build new Heavy Water facilities for 15 years, and move towards implementation of a 130-metric-ton cap on Heavy Water. All excess Heavy Water will be sold internationally outside of country.
- Enhance access to uranium mines and mills, and continuous surveillance of centrifuge manufacturing and storage locations.
• Provisionally implement the Additional Protocol to its IAEA safeguards agreement. Along with other verification measures, including the deployment of online inspection monitors – this significantly increases some aspects of the IAEA's ability to monitor nuclear activities.

So far, Iran has not violated any serious aspects of the agreement since implementation day, and the arguments over its actions involved largely procedural issues. If one compares this to the situation in North Korea, it represents striking – if still far from perfect – success.

**Dealing with Partners Inside and Outside the Region**

The U.S. cannot lead where others do not follow, and cannot act as if it could deal with Iran alone. Its strategy must win as much Congressional and bipartisan support as possible, and must take account of the fact that the JCPOA is a UN agreement where the U.S. has five countries as negotiating partners, and where the attitudes of its strategic partners in the region as also of critical importance. It cannot treat its relations with Iran as a two party, single sum game – particularly because the negotiations that led to the JCPOA made it clear that reaching any agreement required the support of the EU in matching U.S. sanctions and the support of Russia and China.

The JCPOA agreement involved Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and China as well as the U.S., and had EU participation. None of these other participants in the effort that led to negotiation of the JCPOA want Iran to become a nuclear weapons state, but none see Iran as being as threatening as the JCPOA's opponents in the U.S. do. Europe sees Iran as a potential investment opportunity and trading partner. China sees it as a key source of petroleum imports and trade, and Russia sees Iran as a way of expanding its strategic influence in the Middle East and South Asia, competing with the United States, investment opportunities, and way of influencing OPEC.

No other participant is as concerned with the potential weaknesses in the JCPOA, its expiration dates, the limits to inspection and Iranian procurement and research activity, potential violations, and Iran's other efforts to build-up its military forces and expand its regional influence. All share U.S. concerns to some degree, but Russia and China see Iran as an opportunity as well as a threat, and America's European allies have made it clear that they do not wish to push for major revision in the JCPOA at this time and see U.S. sanctions and financial policies as a barrier to their investment opportunities and increase in trade.

Unilaterally terminating U.S. agreement to the JCPOA – particularly in the context of a bitter internal debate in the U.S. risks isolating the U.S. America's European allies already seem to have made it clear that they will not use the threat of reintroducing their sanctions to force Iran to renegotiate or support U.S. opponents of the agreement.

The U.S. must also consider the impact of any withdrawal from the agreement, and Iranian to nuclear weapons development on the region. The current JCPOA was a reached without the participation of any of Iran's neighbors, particularly Israel and the Arab states. U.S. strategy cannot now ignore the views of the states that feel most threatened by Iran, that are involved in a major arms race with Iran, and see its nuclear programs and every other aspect of its strategic activities as threatening. It also cannot ignore how the collapse of the agreement might affect the nuclear power programs of states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and their focus on nuclear proliferation.

The U.S. must take account of the fact that America's strategic partners and allies in the region have different views of the Iranian threat. Israel's government and political leadership opposes the agreement to varying degrees. Gulf states like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Jordan may
not be united, but they do see Iran as a major threat in terms of conventional forces, its missile build-up, its growing asymmetric forces, and its growing regional influence.

At the same time, U.S. action to effectively kill the JCPOA might worsen the existing divisions between its Gulf allies. Qatar and Oman see more opportunities for negotiation with Iran. Kuwait is concerned over Iran’s actions but has avoided confrontation to the degree it can. Iran has growing influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Egypt is focused primarily on its domestic stability and security, and Turkey is focused primarily on its security, the Kurds, Syria, and Iraq.

A clear U.S. commitment to stay in the Gulf, and help deal with the other threat Iran poses might well, in contrast, help unite its Arab partners. Iran seems unlikely to sacrifice its missile programs – inside or outside the JCPOA – as long as it cannot modernize an air force that lags more behind the U.S. and Arab Gulf states each year.

Once again, a joint position offering Iran limits to the U.S.-Arab build up and better economic relations might also add a “carrot” to these “sticks” that might modify regime behavior over time.

**Playing the Long Game**

Imperfect Arms Control agreements are one of the many prices of living in an imperfect world. Their imperfections are also no incentive to terminate them in ways that end in making things far worse. Given American domestic politics, it may be too late to try to develop a long-term strategy for dealing with the JCPOA. If the President decides to effectively terminate the agreement, however, the U.S. will have to deal with the outside impact of any partisan and expert debate, live with a lack of allied support and a renewal of EU sanctions. The U.S. will also have to cope with any Iranian return to an active nuclear weapons programs as best it can.

Any sudden effort to terminate U.S. agreement to the JCPOA will also impact heavily on the already critical security issues in the Gulf region, as well as provoke a Russian and Chinese response. The U.S. will be pushed into a damage control posture and one of improvising as best it can.

The alternative is for the U.S. is to play a long game – laying the groundwork for demanding Iranian compliance and changes in the agreements – and for European and 5+1 snap back on sanctions when and if Iran actually violates the agreement or deadlines approach where Iran shows any indication that it will exploit them to resume nuclear weapons activity.

**Play a Long Game to Deal with the JCPOA and Iranian Nuclear Threat**

First, pursue a long-term strategy to make the JCPOA a lasting agreement and make it more effective:

- Avoid open confrontation with European states, Russia, and China over the JCPOA, but make it that the United States will continue to seek specific and well-defined improvements in the JCPOA – fully explaining what these changes are and justifying them in-depth – educating allies, Iran, and other states as to the nature and justification for its position.

- Push the IAEA for full enforcement of every inspection provision and reporting publicly in full-depth on inspections, activities in the procurement channel, and any other suspect activities rather than in partial and outline form.

- Issue its own semi-annual, and in-depth report on Iran’s compliance and nuclear-biological-chemical (NBC)l activities and missile development – again educating its allies, challenging Iran, and laying the groundwork for snap back and enforcement.
• Wait for actual Iranian violations or suspect activities to push for allied and 5+1 action call for joint action to put pressure on Iran.

• Build a case over time to extend and/or modify each area where the treaty now puts time limits on its restraints on Iran. These limits, however, represent a far less important aspect of the JCPOA than many critics imply. Iran's agreement not to proliferate never expires, nor does the unrestricted access of the IAEA.

• Even the 10-year restriction on new centrifuges will not expire until 2025. The 15-year limit on the 98% reduction in enriched Uranium only expires in 2030. The 20-year limit on IAEA centrifuge monitoring expires in 2035, and the 25-year limit on Uranium ore monitoring expires in 2040. There seems to be little real-world chance that today's problems with Iran's nuclear efforts are really going to be static 10 years in the future, much less 25.

• Consider using the threat of, or actually making, a formal commitment to provide its regional allies with extended deterrence if Iran should violate the JCPOA or move towards proliferation.

• Signal that U.S. opposition to Arab use of nuclear power plants to proliferate might weaken if Iran proliferates. Quietly work with Israel to make it clear how dangerous Iranian efforts could be.

Play a Long Game to Deal with Iran’s Missile Threats

Second, play a separate but reinforcing game to deal with Iran’s ballistic missile and cruise missile threat. The U.S. should not try to link Iran's ballistic and cruise missile developments to the JCPOA as long as these do not have nuclear-biological-chemical warheads. It should not, however, ignore the threat. It should play a separate long game on missiles by pushing for arms control while confronting Iran with improvements in allied deterrent and defense capabilities if it continues to build up its missile threat:

• Creating separate tracks for arms control negotiations on Iran's missile testing, development, and modernization – fully publicizing the growing Iranian missile threat, particularly Iran's efforts to acquire precision guided systems and its transfers of missiles to third parties like the Hezbollah and the Houthi.

• Provide a detailed semi-annual report on Iran's missile forces, developments, and actions.

• Continue full support of Israeli missile defense programs.

• Develop an integrated theater missile defense plan for its Arab strategic partners in the Gulf, offering U.S. weapons and technology and support from U.S. ships with AEGIS/Standard missile defenses.

• Consider transfer of tailored long-range land/air conventionally-armed cruise missile systems designed for deterrent use against Iran to Arab strategic partners in the Gulf.

• Consider sanctions and denial of aid to any country that accepts transfer of Iranian missiles or that allows third parties like the Hezbollah to deploy them on its soil.

• Sustain a strong CENTCOM presence to support Arab strategic partners in containing Iran’s presence in other countries, and conventional and asymmetric forces.

Play a Long Game in to Deal with Iran’s Asymmetric and Influence Threats

Third, the U.S. should act to fully implement the parts of its new National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy that focus on the need to deal with the broader range of Iranian threats. The U.S. already plans to take many elements of such action, although it has not published them in any detail in unclassified form. Some key options include:

• Provide more formal security guarantees to Arab security partners in the region – a guarantee of lasting U.S. security presence in the Gulf – with the quid pro quo that they put an end to the split between Saudi Arabia/UAE/Bahrain and Qatar, and create more effective plans for regional defense cooperation.
• Explain in detail the level of force improvement it is making to its force projection capabilities and presence in the region, showing its partners and their people the level of improvement it is making in the readiness, weapons, and technology of its deployed and deployable forces and reinforcing deterrence of Iran.

• Expand on its existing advisory and exercise programs to seek more direct cooperation in force planning, mission-oriented and interoperable procurement, training and readiness, and integrated air and maritime defense C4/BM and IS&R. Focus on effective deterrence and defense, not arms sales.

• Make it clear that the U.S. will provide lasting security assistance to Iraq if it limits its ties to Iran, and is encouraging other Arab states to help and support Iraq.

• Bring Jordan as a full partner into the U.S. effort to develop forces to deter Iran.

• Reinforce cooperation with France, Italy, and the United Kingdom in power projection and regional security planning.

• Expand efforts to find some viable end to the war in Yemen that offers some hole of building lasting stability and development.

• Work with Arab partners and Israel to deter and contain Assad in Syria and secure Syria's northeast east and borders.

Play a Long Regime Modification Game that Offers Carrots as Well as Sticks

Finally, the U.S. has no real game-plan in terms of regime change. That must come from within. It does, however, have a potential long game to play by encouraging regime modification.

It is far from clear that the present Iranian regime has real moderates, or that they can prevail over Iran's hardliners, and Revolutionary Guards. Playing a long game, however, means being very careful never to confuse the Iranian people with its hardliners and the Guards, and the U. S. should not assume it cannot deal with parts of its current power structure that want to focus on Iran's economic development, internal stability, and the needs of its people.

The U.S. should make it clear that it wants to improve relations with Iran, does not confuse Iran's hardline elements with its people, and will deal with any elements in its power struggle that make it clear that eliminating/reducing sanctions and barriers to banking/investment/trade can be tied to peaceful development and not any form of military build-up.

The U.S. should offer incentives, not simply pose barriers and issue threats. It should firmly establish conditionality for improvements in relations, trade, and any form of aid, but it should be clear at all times that the U.S. is seeking better relations, will work with Iran if it seeks to respond, and would be willing to match Iran in any serious effort to create a more stable security arrangement in the Gulf and the region.

It may well be a long-term goal at best, but the U.S. should not seek to win the arms race in the region. The U.S. should seek to end it.